

*Reflections*

My name is Judi. Her name was a warm liquid caress across the tongue. The name was music that lingered and echoed in the ear like the middle tone of a harp. It was a name to create images of grace, tranquility, and beauty, or conjure the soft zephyr of a warm summer evening. Lura.

*My name is Lura. I used to love the rub, tickle, and giggle games my grandfather played with me. I loved being tossed into the air and caught by his strong warm hands. I even liked it when he gently rubbed his whiskery face on my naked tummy. I loved it when he would whirl me around and around, my dress floating away from my body, and if the spinning was feet first, my skirt would sometimes fly up and cover my face. You could hear my squeals of delight all over the house. But I was uncomfortable when Granddad's warm hand held me at the center of my being, where my legs joined my body. Still, I felt loved.*

Lura and her family lived one house away from ours for three years, until her family moved to the other side of the river. Those were the years when small girls who had few neighbors would normally begin to form lifetime bonds, the time from seven to ten. Nonetheless, I never knew Lura well. Although we caught the same school bus, occasionally shared the same seat, disembarked at the same stop each day, and frequently walked to our respective homes together, we were two silent children with nothing to share.

*By the time my parents, my sister, and I moved into my grandfather's house, when I was seven years old, I knew that I was not a pretty child. With up to eleven of us living in that small two-bedroom house there wasn't a lot of attention to spare for one small, scruffy girl. There was a little neighbor girl who lived just one house away from Granddad's. I always thought of her unkindly, as 'the princess'. Her name was Judi. Judi was my age but slightly smaller than I was.*



*Oh, how I envied Judi. She had glossy, dishwater blond, bouncy Shirley Temple ringlets; her dresses were always carefully starched and ironed, not limp and bedraggled hand-me-downs like mine. Judi had a small pert 'ski jump' nose with a light dusting of freckles, instead of a plain old pug nose like mine stuck in a blotchy looking freckle covered face. Her white and brown saddle shoes were always polished and her snow white anklets were neatly folded down. My shoes were always scuffed and dirty. My anklets were grayish, shapeless things that were always down around my ankles and pulled inside the heels of my shoes, revealing the dirt encrusted there. In the wintertime, Judi wore heavy, outdoor leggings that matched her royal blue coat, while I wore hand knitted saggy, baggy brown wool 'tights'. They kept my legs warm but they were so ugly twisted around my skinny legs. I guess those tights fit the rest of me. Judi's eyes were blue, but unlike my pale, pale blue eyes, hers were a deep sparkling, midnight blue with a thick fringe of long curling eyelashes. I think that Judi would have made friends if I had been the least bit receptive, but I had too much to hide.*

Lura Andersen was the least attractive little girl I ever saw. I felt sorry for her. She resembled a scruffy, beat up, ill-cared-for and hard-used alley kitten. Lura's freckle covered face appeared perpetually dirty. Her wide, thick, sulky lips were always chapped and cracked as though her small pink, pointed tongue constantly licked them. Lura's hair was a hacked off, stiff, dirty, dull, carrot red. Her young body was chunky and ungraceful. Between her short, nearly colorless eyelashes, Lura's eyes were blue. I think that Lura's clothes were hand-me-downs from her older sister; they were faded and of nondescript colors. The skirts fell in limp wrinkled folds.

*By the time my family moved into my grandfather's house, playing games with him was no longer a simple joyful pleasure. Our play had become a dark, secret, painful experience, something to be endured. I did not want to live there. I did not want to be so easily within my grandfather's reach. I did not want to go for walks in the orchard with him. I knew that once there, he would take my panties down and open his pants and the pain would begin. I knew that it was all*



*my fault. I knew that this happened to me because I was ugly and the pain was all that someone so ugly deserved.*

I have often wondered whether it was possible that the eyes that bracketed Lura's flat freckled pug nose were pretty instead of the washed out lackluster blue that my memory sees. I keep thinking that, surely, there must have been one or more favorable features in that little girl's face. I confess, I cannot remember anything redeeming in her appearance. I have tried to remember young Lura's personality. I recall a sullen child. Either her face was cast down and she would not meet your eyes, or she gave you a seemingly blank, empty, bovine stare out of those pale blue eyes. Her 'conversation' consisted of mumbles.

*Shortly after we moved into Granddad's overflowing small house, my uncle (my father's brother, who also lived there), started playing kissing and hugging games with me. I knew what was going to happen. I knew what I was doing was 'wrong', but I wasn't quite sure why. Even before my grandfather and uncle told me that this was, "our little secret," I knew I couldn't tell anyone. I dreaded it whenever I was left alone in the house with one of them, and I could not find reasonable excuses to refuse 'the treat' of going for rides with them. Caught in what would one day be called a "catch 22," I was not allowed to remain a child, yet I was forced to act the child.*

The Andersen family was referred to as 'Arkies.' I overheard my parents say that they were a shiftless and lazy lot. They were thought to be a bit dirty; they did not seem to bathe often enough. Their manners and speech, with its alien southern nasal twang, were rough, loud, and crude. Nevertheless, these are not the reasons why I never knew Lura well. Her personality seemed curiously flat, as though she did not invite and would not welcome friendship. Maybe she was only shy. I too was shy, too shy to insist on making friends. I know now that Lura desperately needed a friend.

*My daddy started playing rub and stroke and poke games with me. When Daddy's other brother came to visit us he took me for rides in his car. It seemed as*



*though no matter where I turned someone had their hands or parts inside of my panties and inside of me. I came to think that I gave off some kind of scent or wore a sign, visible only to those who knew where to look, that said, "Take me. I can be used."*

In a small town, everyone is known either by sight or by name. When Lura was thirteen, she made headlines on the front page of the local newspaper for the second time in her young life. The first time was on Halloween night in her ninth year. As she was helping two younger cousins cross a downtown street, a speeding car struck her. The impact threw Lura under the car and dragged her for several feet. Thankfully, other than relatively minor scratches and bruises, Lura was unhurt. The town's unkind opinion was, "She's so ugly, what are a few scrapes and bruises to her?" Did anyone ever think to praise her quick heroic action in pushing her young cousins out of the path of the speeding car? The driver of the car, a pretty and popular teen who had been drinking, got off with a light warning. Not very fair, but I do not think that Lura ever expected the world would be fair to her.

*I remember the winter dark street on the Halloween night, when I was nine years old, and the fear I felt when I saw the lights of a car rushing towards us. I don't know how I thought fast enough to push my small cousins, Mike and Danny, out of the way. Being hit by the car didn't hurt as much as I thought it would, maybe my heavy winter coat absorbed some of the impact. Being dragged a few feet hurt more, but it was quickly over. I think that dying that night would have been a better, a cleaner end.*

The second and last time that Lura was on the front pages of the local newspaper was when, alone in the house on a warm quiet summer afternoon, she took her father's shotgun and shot herself in her pregnant stomach. The local newspaper reported that her grandfather had an incestuous relationship with her and she was pregnant with his child. Later, the story circulated through the community that in addition to her grandfather, she had endured being raped by her



father and two of her uncles. This might have been just common gossip; does it really matter if it was four rapists or only one? Could life have robbed young Lura of anything more? She was downright ugly and she never seemed very bright, but who ever sought to find out what was behind her unattractive, sad, sullen face and chunky body?

I am sure that Lura had the same hopes, dreams, and yearnings as other little girls. Like most little girls, Lura probably had Cinderella dreams of a Prince Charming, or a valiant knight on a white charger who would come and make her life perfect. But, I think that Lura's yearnings for that nebulous someone to come and rescue her from her nightmare life must have been much, much, stronger.

*I remember lying in bed with my short colorless eyelashes squeezed tightly closed, scrunching up my freckle covered face. I held my stubby awkward body rigidly tense. I clenched my hands in white knuckled earnestness as I prayed with all of my might and all of my soul for someone to "Come. Save me. Make this awful life stop." It didn't stop . . . I gradually realized it would never stop. Slowly, my hope withered and died. There was no place to run, no place to hide.*

Lura made her awful life stop the only way she could think of—with both barrels of a shotgun blasting into her thirteen-year-old pregnant belly. Her fame or infamy was brief, over and forgotten by all but a handful in a day or two; the day or two that it took for her young life to drain away. Nobody seemed to care. It is a sad fact that no one was ever punished for the crimes against Lura. The judgment of the town was predictably harsh, "How could anyone, no matter how desperate, have had sex with HER?"

*It is amazing what one understands as soon as they have opened the door and passed from the darkness into the light. For instance, I know that I did nothing wrong. Being ugly or pretty had nothing to do with it. I believe that if my life had been filled with light, laughter, love, safety, security, and freedom that I, too, could have been attractive, if not pretty. I know now, that Judi for all*

*of my envy of her, had a desperate need for a friend too. I know that even if we had known of our mutual need, we would not have had the words to share our common dilemma. She was lucky and never became an unwed pregnant teen, but I have watched her struggle throughout her life. She has never been able to trust; those who she was taught to love and trust betrayed her. Perhaps I was the lucky one.*

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